
Judiciary Committee

HB 2848

Title: An act relating to protecting confidentiality of domestic violence information.

Brief Description: Protecting confidentiality of domestic violence information.

Sponsors: Representatives Lantz, Ericks, Santos, Williams, Rodne, Priest, Hudgins, Darneille, Morrell, Kessler, McDonald, Roberts, McCoy, Kenney, Campbell, P. Sullivan, Wallace, Hasegawa, Kilmer, Green, Simpson, Wood, Ormsby and Springer.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Makes communications between a domestic violence victim and a domestic violence advocate privileged;
- Prohibits a domestic violence program from disclosing information about a recipient of domestic violence services unless the recipient consents or unless required by statute or court order.

Hearing Date: 1/27/06

Staff: Trudes Tango (786-7384).

Background:

Privileged Communications

The judiciary has inherent power to compel witnesses to appear and testify in judicial proceedings so that the court will receive all relevant evidence. However, the common law and statutory law recognize exceptions to compelled testimony in some circumstances, including "testimonial privileges." Privileges are recognized when certain classes of relationships or communications within those relationships are deemed of such importance that they are to be protected.

Washington statutory law establishes a number of privileges, including communications made by a sexual assault victim to a sexual assault victim advocate. The advocate may disclose information without the consent of the victim to prevent a clear, imminent risk of serious physical injury or death. The advocate is immune from civil or criminal action that arises from a good faith disclosure. In an action arising from a disclosure, the advocate's good faith is presumed.

DSHS and domestic violence information

The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) administers state and federal funds for domestic violence programs, which include shelters. The DSHS establishes minimum standards

for shelters receiving grants. The shelters must provide certain services, including client advocacy and counseling. Client records maintained by a domestic violence program are not subject to discovery in any judicial proceeding unless certain conditions are met.

The DSHS also administers and disburses state and federal public assistance funds. The DSHS may not disclose the contents of any records, files, or other communications, unless the disclosure is directly connected with the administration of the public assistance programs. However, an individual may inquire to the DSHS whether a named person is receiving public assistance, and the DSHS must provide the individual with a "yes" or "no" answer.

Summary of Bill:

Privileged communications

Communications made between a domestic violence victim and domestic violence advocate are privileged and may not be disclosed without the consent of the victim. A "domestic violence advocate" is an employee or supervised volunteer from a community-based domestic violence program or human services program that provides information, advocacy, counseling, crisis intervention, emergency shelter, or support to victims of domestic violence and who is not employed by or under the direct supervision of law enforcement, a prosecutor's office, or child protective services of DSHS.

An advocate may disclose confidential communications without the victim's consent if failure to do so is likely to result in a clear, imminent risk of serious physical injury or death or if required under the mandatory reporting law for child abuse. Domestic violence advocates are immune from liability for good faith disclosure. In an action arising out of disclosure, the advocate's good faith is presumed.

DSHS and domestic violence information

Unless required by court order, a domestic violence program and those assisting in delivering services, or any agent, employee, or volunteer of a domestic violence program shall not disclose information about a recipient of shelter, advocacy, or counseling without the recipient's written, signed authorization.

The recipient's authorization must have a reasonable time limit on the duration. If the authorization does not have a specific expiration date, the authorization expires 90 days after the date it was signed. The disclosure is limited to the extent authorized by the recipient. An authorization is not a waiver of the recipient's rights or privileges under other statutes, rules of evidence, or common law.

If disclosure is required by statute or court order, the domestic violence program shall make reasonable attempts to notify the recipient of the disclosure. If personally identifying information is to be disclosed, the domestic violence program must take steps necessary to protect the privacy and safety of the persons affected by the disclosure.

The DSHS may answer in the affirmative or negative whether a person is receiving public assistance unless the answer is likely to impair the safety of past or current victims of domestic violence or stalking. The DSHS must adopt rules to establish procedures to protect the confidentiality and prevent disclosure of information that might impair the safety of victims of domestic violence and stalking. The rules must address the sharing of information between agencies and other partners.

For nonshelter community-based services receiving funding from the DSHS, the department must establish minimum standards designed to enhance safety and security by means such as, but not limited to, client advocacy, client confidentiality, and counseling.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.